



**Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush**  
**Text: Isaiah 9:2-7**

**December 22, 2024**

### **From Darkness to Light**

Listen again to the first five words we just heard from the prophet Isaiah: The people who walk in darkness. The truth is modern human beings have almost entirely lost the sense of darkness. We have almost no concept of what used to be commonplace – a dark village, a dark city street, a dark monastery. If we step into a dark house now, we immediately reach for a light switch. If the power goes out, we turn on the flashlight on our smartphones. Real darkness is a rarity now. Think of the last time you were in a totally dark place – somewhere absolutely dark. Now imagine trying to walk there. That is where Isaiah locates us when he offers his words of hope.

Remembering what it's like to sit in darkness or walk in darkness is a very important concept on this fourth Sunday in Advent. That's because, if you think about it, almost all of the crucial moments of the Christmas story happened in the dark. And it was there in the dark that God's power and God's love were seen the clearest.

Darkness 1: *In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.* To be registered means to be enrolled, literally counted and put on the Roman tax rolls so that your wealth could support a government oppressing you. To honor this decree meant that Joseph and his very pregnant wife had to travel from their home in Nazareth to a place that only had historical meaning for them – the city of Bethlehem far to the south, the ancestral home of Joseph's family. We don't know if they'd ever been there before. We do know that the city was overcrowded because of the census. And the best Joseph and Mary could do was walk the streets looking for a place to bed down for the night. So as evening fell, they were a couple walking in darkness - no lights; no lanterns; no room in the inn.

Darkness 2: *In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.* Cows and horses graze without eating the grass down to its roots because they draw in the vegetation with their tongues and then tear it off with their lower teeth. But sheep have cleft upper lips that let them nibble the grass down to the soil. So although they eat less than cattle, they need to constantly find fresh pasture; which means shepherds don't spend much time in any one place. They live wandering the fields, far from the city, far from lights. They too walk in darkness.

Darkness 3: *In the time of King Herod, magi from the East came to Jerusalem asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage."* Foreign emissaries used to visit neighboring countries bringing gifts and tribute to new kings. In this case, the visitors were also astrologers, reading signs in heaven for news

about earth. When did they travel? Mostly at night, following a star. They were the magi walking in darkness to Bethlehem. Sadly, their message frightened King Herod, causing him to order the death of scores of male babies in the land of Judea. Very soon Herod's soldiers would be sent out, their swords and armor clanging as they marched down the road, powers of darkness set loose in the world.

The people who walked in darkness: Mary and Joseph, shepherds, magi. Mary and Joseph's eyes had to adjust to the darkness around them as they searched out a stable that would soon hold the Christ child. The shepherds were initially startled by the brightness of the angel's visitation; but as soon as the angels left, the darkness returned; and the shepherds had to navigate the fields, running, stumbling in the dark, to find their way to Bethlehem. And the magi did almost all their traveling at night, trusting solely in the distant beams of a star, shining in the dark sky but one which everyone else scarcely noticed.

God drew near to all of them, was active in the darkness, just as God draws near to us when we walk in darkness. And yes, we will walk in darkness; it's unavoidable. At different points in our lives there are three darknesses we must all navigate: the darkness of pain, because we are made of flesh and bone; the darkness of guilt, because we make choices and not all of them will be good ones; and the darkness of loss, because everything we cherish is impermanent, including ourselves. Yet Isaiah speaks what we need to hear: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. God comes near in our dark moments and offers the light we need to see.

As our eyes adjust from darkness to light, we are able to focus on a newborn child and hear the titles from of old being ascribed to him: Wonderful Counselor, wisdom incarnate; Mighty God, the one in whom creation and authority are combined; Everlasting Parent, the expression of timeless, self-giving Love; Prince of Peace, the one who invites us to do what is just and to study war no more. The light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Too often overly exuberant preachers try to convince us that Christmas is about bright spotlights of glory, blinding us like deer caught in God's high-beams. Yet evangelical shouting to step into God's light offers no true comfort whenever we have to walk in darkness - the darknesses of pain, guilt, or loss. That's why the real message of Christmas is that God came into our dark and weary world. God chose to be born as a child in a humble stable, a place in which our night-accustomed eyes are able to see him there in a manger. And as we focus on him, a healing, gentle light is reflected back to us - and it is Wonderful, Comforting, Loving, Peaceful.

You have company in this dark season. Look around and see the shepherds, the magi, Mary and Joseph walking beside you. And know that unto us a child has been given, who is Christ the Lord. Darkness has no lasting power now. Believe the good news of the gospel.  
AMEN